GOD THE MENDER

July 12, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 5:21-24
Genesis 33:1-14

"leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." --Matthew 5:24 (RSV)

At our most expansive we have been able to talk about God as the power of reconciliation, the cosmic energy of healing working always to bring all things into beautiful and harmonious unity.

And yet, we have always known that at the heart of the matter it is more particular and more personal than that. At our best we have known that God begins as a healer of the human spirit in relationship with other human spirits. God is a fixer of human brokenness. The very heart of the matter is that God is a mender. It is there from the beginning, one of our oldest and best and most important stories... It is there in the segment of an old story we just heard. It is truly a Genesis story - It is pre-Israel. The story was around a long time before there was an Israel or a Moses or the Ten Commandments. It is one of the stories which was passed down orally, around thousands of camp fires, across generations of wandering Semites before it was written down. It is a formative story for Judaism and Christianity. It is, because of its age alone, a very precious treasure. It is not a simple story - nor a short one - so let me sketch it briefly so we can see the matter before us more clearly... It is about, among other things, a God who is a mender.

The last time Jacob had seen his twin brother Esau, it was one of those frightened, over the shoulder glances to see if the pursuer is gaining ground on you. Jacob was on the lam, headed for the border, running for his life. The last time he heard Esau's voice, it was a threat to kill. The last time they were together Jacob had just cheated Esau out of everything he had - and it was that last experience which had been on Jacob's mind, fairly consistently for nearly twenty years. To say that the relationship between the brothers was broken is putting it mildly.

From the beginning it had seemed that they were headed in different directions, marching to very different drummers. His father Isaac preferred Esau; liked Esau's manly interests, encouraged Esau's love of hunting and farming. His mother, Rebekah, favored Jacob who, we are told, "dwelt in tents..." While Esau was out killing game with Isaac, Jacob was home helping in the kitchen. And I guess that was a lot more significant before we became sensitive to sex-role stereotyping.

In any event, Jacob, early on in the story, convinces his brother Esau to trade his birthright for a bowl of pottage; which turns out to be rich, aromatic, lentil soup... The story is made a little more plausible when you ponder how powerful the aroma of your favorite food is and how you have been heard to say - "I'd kill for a Vienna Frank smothered in onions and relish," or as one of my colleagues said to my son last week at 9:00 p.m. in the parking lot - "I'd give you $500 for that pizza you're carrying."

Esau must have said something like: "I'd give anything for some of that vegetable soup you're cooking, Jacob." And Jacob said: "O.K., how about your birthright?" And maybe Esau didn't think Jacob was serious but he agreed and we know, early on, that the relationship between these twin brothers is a little peculiar.

And that isn't the worst of it. For instance, years after the pottage incident, Jacob deceives his father - by impersonating his brother and ends up receiving the blessing and the first part of the inheritance. His father Isaac is nearly blind. Jacob effects an elaborate disguise to impersonate Esau. It's pretty sorry and shabby business. Esau is furious, threatens to kill Jacob and with an assist from his mother, Jacob heads out for his Uncle Laban's place, across the border. That's the last time he saw Esau.

On the first night of that escape, Jacob had a strange dream, a ladder connecting heaven and earth, and angels on the ladder and the voice of God promising to be with Jacob and keep him wherever he went. When he came to the land to the East he met his Uncle Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, marries them both, has a lot of children, becomes enormously wealthy by systematically stealing his Uncle Laban's livestock right out from under him, and when he has so much it's getting embarrassing, he hears God calling him home. While Laban is out of town on business, Jacob and his wives and children and servants and cattle set out, in caravan, for home, the promised land. At the last minute Rachel runs back and steals her father's personal household gods, for good measure.

As they near the border Jacob begins to worry and at the ford of a stream by name of Jabbok - sends his entire entourage across and sits down to wait out the night.

During that night Jacob is accosted by an anonymous stranger with whom he wrestles. The stranger who never reveals his name, - but clearly either is God or represents God, wounds Jacob in the hip, blesses him and gives him a new name...Israel. And in the early light of dawn he limps across the steam to the promised land - home - and some unfinished business with Esau.

It wasn't long until his worst fears are confirmed. He sees them coming on the horizon - sees the dust from 400 horsemen - fear clutches and burns in his throat. 400 horsemen with Esau out front! And he leaps into action, gets everybody organized - women and children out front - surely he won't attack! - beloved Rachel and her only son Joseph in the rear. And then Jacob does one of those peculiar, inexplicable things he has a way of doing. Having set it up so that a troupe of mothers and nannies and babies

are what the 400 horsemen will see when they come over the brow of the hill at full gallop... Jacob steps out in front himself and when the gap has narrowed so that the two brothers can see one another - Jacob falls down, bowing his neck to the dust - seven times - in eloquent and abject homage - apology - to his brother.

This is, at once a funny scene and a poignant scene, an embarrassingly humiliating gesture - this enormously powerful potentate, bowing and scraping - right in front of his women and children and servants... And when Esau takes it all in, he stops his troop of 400 horsemen, dismounts, runs to Jacob, without reservation or thought for his own dignity, and the tears begin to flow and he falls on his brother, not in anger, but in love and relief and joy and they embrace and kiss and they weep, both of them, tears, the tears of mature and strong men running down their faces. And when they get around to talking Jacob says something striking to his brother - simple and beautiful - and strong and unforgettable: "truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

And then the story begins to disintegrate again. I almost hate to say it, but there is at least a possibility that Jacob pulls one last scam. That's quite a statement - in a culture where to see God was to die, a culture which revered God's holiness so much that God's name - Yahweh - was never pronounced. That's quite a statement in the middle of this incredible tale of family intrigue, ladders between heaven and earth, wrestling with strangers, stealing sheep from your father-in-law... to your brother, estranged for twenty years - "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

What do you make of this story? It's entertaining. It has complex characterizations, humor, romance, sentiment, excitement and enough internal intrigue and deception to be a long-running soap opera. But does this story, I wonder, intersect with our stories? Does it help us to see the ways and places where God is actively present in our lives? If it does, it becomes God's Word to us.

There are these common, everyday, middle-of-life experiences in Jacob's story. God encounters Jacob, not so much in holy places - altars, tabernacles and temples, as in common places - when Jacob spends the night, his head on a stone, when he wrestles a stranger till dawn, and when he experiences reconciliation and healing with his brother. God comes in the commonplace and God comes into the life of a man who is not saintly in his behavior, by any one's standards. Jacob is a wonderful mixture of courage and cowardice, commitment and opportunism, high ideals and low performance. He sounds like us. If God can find Jacob interesting, pursue Jacob, use Jacob, stay with Jacob, surely there's hope for you and me. The first and important thing about this story is simply that Jacob is the hero and that God is involved in it. It's a radical notion to think of a God who steps into the middle of life and who uses people like us to do God's work.

In the second place, Jacob's encounter with God, at the Jabbok, and his encounter with his estranged brother, are very much part of the same, single experience. Jacob goes directly from the mysterious encounter with the holy to the difficult but very human and unholy confrontation with his estranged brother and there is something of the genius of Judaism and

Christianity in that. Jacob's experience with God is authenticated by his experience with his brother... not only can't you separate the two, but there is the suggestion here that the first isn't real until the second happens. Stated radically that means that religious experiences - born again experiences, mystical meetings with God, overwhelming conversion experiences are not ultimately private; in fact they aren't authentic unless they result in altered behavior, such as reconciled and redeemed human relationships.

The meeting with God leaves Jacob crippled. Jacob is equipped for reconciling because he's wounded. He knows something new about vulnerability, about his own humanity.

"God will not be taken lightly," is the way one scholar sees this text.... "There will be no cheap reconciliations. On the way to the affronted brother, Jacob must deal with the crippling (and blessing) God." (God who blesses him but also leaves him crippled.) [Genesis, p. 272, Interpretation]

Jewish poet and author, Arthur I. Waslow, has written a poem and a book about Jacob called Godwrestling. In it he observes: "To wrestle with God is also to wrestle with human beings - ourselves and others. It is to face polarities and unify them." [see The Preacher as Jacob, Kenneth L. Gibble, p. 109, 110]

The genius of Judaism is in understanding that when you break with brothers and sisters you break with God. The New Testament is full of that antiphonal dynamic of grace...

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"... linguistically crafted so you won't be able to separate the two, so you won't try to experience divine healing apart from human healing... God's forgiveness apart from your forgiving others, or put positively, so that you will learn to experience God's forgiveness by forgiving those also who have wronged you. - "You cannot love God and hate your brother," the author of the First Letter of John taught.

Jesus put it this way:

> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not kill.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with a brother or sister shall be liable to judgment." And then, in case they didn't get the point, "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that someone has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to that person - and then come and offer your gift."

That was a provocative and radical way of saying that God is fundamentally a mender; that God puts a higher priority on getting your relationships right, than performing your religious duties right, in this instance the highest and holiest act - placing your gift on the sacred altar.

Now, this is not the direction we go, left to our own devices. We

are more inclined to define religion as doing religious things and if there are relational issues they're confined to me and my God, walking together in the garden - during which we are assured that, indeed, we are number one... or talking together in the privileged privacy of my bed-time prayers. In fact, we have been known to universalize that mentality and conclude that faith in God has nothing to do with other people, particularly with the structures of society in which other people and we co-habit; like schools, courts, political parties and hospitals.

Jesus forever ruled out the insular religion that confines itself to the sanctuary of the individual soul. Jesus, the Jew - knew that life is in community and so is religion. Jesus - the many-times Great Grandson of Jacob who wrestled with God and then confronted his estranged brother, taught that the two are inseparable. Jesus, Word of God incarnate, is the evidence that the whole energy of God is invested in healing human beings - human society and personal human relationships.

Suddenly, this ancient story comes in tight. Suddenly we're looking - no more at broad cosmic issues - or an ancient comedy - but in a mirror - at my relationships with my spouse, my friend, my child, my parent, my colleague... Suddenly this old, old story is coming at us with some very contemporary truth... Who hasn't nursed a grudge? Who hasn't been virtually entrapped in the familiar dynamic of emotional punch - counter punch... "I'm not speaking till she does..." "He's the one who should apologize, not me..." "Hell will freeze over before I ask her again..." Who hasn't almost nurtured the brokenness of a relationship? Who doesn't need a little help mending?

Jacob assumed Esau had been nursing that grudge for twenty years. He was wrong - but he might not be far off target in our situation... It seems to me that we do have a way of enjoying the brokenness sometime... Frederick Buechner has written my favorite description of sustained anger...

> "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." [F. Beuchner, Wishful Thinking, p.2]

That is not what God had in mind in creating you and me. Here is a very old story which suggests that the power and presence of God in interpersonal relationships is always pressing for healing. That there is something about God's love for us and our attempt to respond to it that wants to be expressed between people, in love and acceptance and grace and assertive forgiveness.

Do you feel the power of that in this story?... That grace which is Gospel thousand of years before Jesus is born? Esau jumped off his horse, came flying down the draw and in extravagant and full affection reached

down and pulled Jacob up and embraced him. God likes that, the old story suggests. And - God is like that. That's Grace. That's Gospel. And in the same manner the father, in one of Jesus' best stories, comes flying down the road and before the prodigal son can get the apology out, throws his arms around him and embraces him and forgives him... God likes to see that kind of thing happen. God is like that.

The power to heal resides with the offended. The offender can apologize; in a sense, must apologize, but forgiveness happens when the offended forgives. If you have had occasion to forgive or to ask forgiveness, you know that with children, or your parents, you know the futility of hanging reconciliation on an apology... "I'm not budging till you say I'm sorry." The miracle of healing happens when the offended person reaches deep inside and says - "what has happened will no longer be a barrier between us. I will not allow it to continue to separate us."

So we believe that in the fullness of time, what God began with his servant Jacob - between Jacob and his brother Esau, actually - what God is up to in this story - became incarnate - penetrated history - time and space - was born in Bethelehem and lived among us.

We believe that among the myriad of meanings Jesus Christ has for us - the critical one is the healing, reconciling, mending of that which is broken. We believe that in Jesus Christ God has shown the dimensions of grace.

We believe that in Jesus Christ God has reached down and done what was necessary to reconcile... God has forgiven assertively... God has brought together what is broken... between God and ourselves... within our own souls and between us - and those from whom for whatever reason, we are separated.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a beautiful poem - <u>O Brother Man.</u>

> O man - O woman -
> fold to your heart - your sister - your brother...
> to worship rightly is to love each other...

And the poem moves from the personal to the global... to the lovely image of a tree of peace growing out of the ashes of anger.

The heart of the matter is that the Lord of the Universe and the Creator of everything that is - is a Mender.

"Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God," Jacob said to Esau... Truly.

Amen.